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Listening to student voice: an evaluation of Wooglemai Environmental Education Centre's Youth Environmental Network Eco-Leadership Camp

Abstract

The staff members from the Department of Education and Communities Wooglemai Environmental Educational Centre (WEEC) have hosted an annual residential eco-leadership camp for secondary students since 2011. The name of the camp is 'Youth Environmental Network Eco-Leadership Camp' (YEN). The participants have primarily been Year 7 to 10 students from New South Wales government schools. There would normally be thirty students (male and female) attending the YEN, with the duration of the camp being four days and three nights.

The purpose of the YEN camp is to provide an opportunity for students to air their concerns about the state of the planet and create a vision for taking action in their schools and wider communities on critical sustainability issues. Students participate in workshops and activities that promote understanding of both local and global issues about sustainability as well as building their leadership and teamwork skills. The purpose of the camp is to support students in developing projects and campaigns to be carried out at school or community level and beyond. Students receive leadership training as a part of the camp.

The key facilitators of the YEN camp are Frank Calabria and Peter Nicoll from WEEC, Sue Lennox and Ben Maron from OzGreen, and Cate Fredrickson from Taronga Zoo Education Centre.

Previous feedback from participants revealed that through attending the YEN camp they successfully built relationships with other like-minded students, gained a deeper understanding of global sustainability issues, and developed visions and action plans to address some of these issues in their schools and communities. However, staff members of WEEC wanted to know how successful the students had been in implementing their action plans in their schools and communities so that they could make appropriate changes to the make up of the YEN camp if required. The WEEC staff members felt the need to develop deeper understandings of what took place in the schools and communities as the students attempted to implement the action plans that they developed on the YEN camp. In order to achieve these goals, the staff members of WEEC collaborated with Peter Andersen from the University of Wollongong to develop an appropriate research project.

The following sections will describe concisely the research project, findings, recommendations and implications for the Department of Education and Communities.

Keywords

education, environmental, wooglemai, evaluation, voice, centre, student, camp, listening, youth, network, eco, leadership

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Title of project

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Overview

The staff members from the Department of Education and Communities Wooglemai Environmental Educational Centre (WEEC) have hosted an annual residential eco-leadership camp for secondary students since 2011. The name of the camp is 'Youth Environmental Network Eco-Leadership Camp' (YEN). The participants have primarily been Year 7 to 10 students from New South Wales government schools. There would normally be thirty students (male and female) attending the YEN, with the duration of the camp being four days and three nights.

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make appropriate changes to the make up of the YEN camp if required. The WEEC staff members felt the need to develop deeper understandings of what took place in the schools and communities as the students attempted to implement the action plans that they developed on the YEN camp. In order to achieve these goals, the staff members of WEEC collaborated with Peter Andersen from the University of Wollongong to develop an appropriate research project.

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The research project

Frank Calabria and Peter Nicoll from WEEC interviewed nine students who had participated in prior YEN camps and had attempted to implement camp-generated action plans in their schools over a twelve-month period. The students' responses were recorded and transcripts were typed verbatim. The data was analysed by Peter Andersen, from the School of Education at the University of Wollongong and Frank Calabria, from the Woogelemai Environmental Centre.

Research questions

- 1) How successful were the students in achieving the action plans that they generated while on the YEN camp?
- 2) What influenced the students' level of success in achieving their action plans?
- 3) What aspects of the YEN camp need to be maintained or changed in order to effectively support the students to achieve their action plans?

Process for answering questions

Peter Andersen and Frank Calabria used the following data analysis process:

- 1) Thematic clustering of responses given by the participants in response to the interview questions.
- 2) Identification of key findings that related to the research questions.

- 3) Discussion of the findings, focusing on implications for the YEN camp and for the Department of Education and Communities.

Limitations

- 1) The findings and implications of this research project are based on the experiences of only nine students from one environmental education program.
- 2) The participants were self – reporting and triangulation of the data was not conducted with findings from other research projects, other parties within WEEC or the participants’ schools.
- 3) The interviews for this research project were conducted twelve months after the participants had completed the YEN, therefore their memories of what took place may have been less acute than if the interviews were conducted closer to the time when they attempted to take action in their schools.

Findings

The success rate of the students in achieving the action plans that they generated while on the YEN camp:

The students enjoyed limited success in achieving the action plans that they generated while on the YEN camp. Only two students reported that they successfully achieved their action plans or part of their action plans. Student No. 9 stated that she had planned to create an eco-group in her school and succeeded in achieving this goal, along with helping to build a vegetable garden in the school. Student No. 7 planned to ‘begin at home’ and succeeded in building a vegetable garden at her home, while in her school, she succeeded in holding several fundraisers to raise money for a community garden, but failed to see the garden to fruition by the end of the twelve-month period.

Influences on success in achieving action plans:

The specificity of the action plans set during YEN directly influenced the success rates of the children in achieving their action plans in the field: the more specific the plan the more chance of success. Several of the students, who reported that they had failed to achieve the goals in their schools, when asked to describe their plans, gave very general descriptions. For example, Student No. 1 stated that her action plan was to 'Fix her school' and 'spread the word'.

Students enjoyed more success in achieving their action plans when they felt that they were being supported and encouraged by one or more of the following people or groups of people: teachers, fellow students, friends, and family members. Student No. 7 and 9 mentioned that individual teachers had made achieving their action plans easier. Student No.7, in referring to her supportive teacher, said, 'without her it would definitely be very hard to do'. Unless a teacher assisted the students to enact their action plans, the school environments were not 'enabling' locations for the students. Student No. 6 mirrored this point of view when she said, 'it is power...it's hard to get something across when you are only a student'. Students enjoyed more success in achieving their action plans when they felt supported by their fellow-students and friends. Student No. 7 stated that part of the reason behind her success was that 'So it's just not you against everyone'. Student No. 9 also said that the 'friends in the eco group helped to keep the eco group going'. Students who did not receive positive parental support found it difficult to achieve their action plans. Student No. 4 said, 'I think it would be a lot more helpful if my parents were willing to like...do more because me...I'm still a kid really and that's like, makes it hard for me to make my own decisions when I'm still living in their house kind of thing'.

Aspects of the YEN camp that need to be changed or maintained

The camp was seen as an enabling environment for students to be able to work together with like-minded others. Students saw the camp as not only a time for developing an action plan for their school, but an opportunity to work together with students from other schools to develop and implement an action plan to be completed at WEEC during the camp. Student 4 suggested a camp where 'we can do something'

(in relation to a project). Student 7's statement 'perhaps more action is needed on camp' complements this idea. Student 6 also commented stating 'we could go around to schools to make a day together... to bring about change'. These findings suggested a clear call from students to implement action-oriented projects whilst on camp.

Students also felt they needed more skills training to be able to take action. Student 5 stated they needed more skills in presenting their ideas in a variety of setting and to a variety of audiences. Student 3 said they 'don't have the courage to speak to the leadership team in a school. Student 8 had difficulty maintaining members in their eco group stating 'five or six members didn't show up'. These are aspects that could potentially be given more time and focus in future camps.

There is opportunity for the camp to create closer links between students, teachers and EEC staff members to enable greater support for students to succeed. As mentioned earlier in this report, teacher support is integral to student success. Student 4 stated the importance of 'raising the profile of their (eco) group' and that 'children do not feel they have enough authority' whilst Student 5 has emphasised the importance of making students 'accountable' to complete and implement their action plans. EEC staff members should have an effective means of communicating with students and teachers both pre and post camp. EEC staff members, where applicable could also visit schools to assist students with their projects in a way deemed suitable by all members involved. Teacher professional learning could also be supplied by EEC teachers.

Implications for the department

If staff from Environmental Education Centres (EEC) wish to improve the effectiveness of their environmental education programs (EEP) in inspiring children to take action on environmental issues in their schools and communities they need to gather appropriate data from the participants. The data needs to relate to the challenges that the participants face in their schools and communities as they attempt to take action on environmental issues, and how well the EEP that they underwent prepared and supported them to face the challenges faced in their schools and

communities. Designers of EEPs need to focus not only on what takes place in the EEPs but also on what takes place after the participants have completed the EEPs and returned into their everyday domains.

A critical way of supporting children to take action on environmental issues in their schools and communities is to design EEPs that not only help the children to create a vision for action but also encourage them to build specific, practical goals that are aligned to their vision and highly implementable in their schools and communities. This would require staff members in EECs to work with the students to scaffold their visions so that they are attainable in their schools and communities.

Collaboration between staff from EECs and the children should not stop once the children have completed the EEPs. It is very important that EEC staff build a relationship with the schools into which the children are returning. There are various ways that this can be achieved:

- 1) Prior to the commencement of the EEP, specific teachers from the participants' schools are designated to support and encourage the students once they return from the EEP and implement their environmental action plans.
- 2) The staff members of the EEC visit the schools after the completion of the EEP to hold workshops with the designated teachers and students in order to enhance the support and encouragement process.
- 3) EEC staff members provide professional learning to staff members – this could be the whole staff, or staff associated with a particular year group related to students on the camp, or staff interested in or assigned to sustainability education, leadership education, or project based learning education.